

winning over hearts and minds to just and sustainable goals



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Empowering U – An Introduction

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Empowering U is a deep civic empowerment program with wide application to other important community goals – the development of social, political, and economic capital on the part of people with few community networks. Heartland Democracy has worked with a range of participants in a variety of host institutions. We focus on youth; immigrant communities of people who are finding their way in a new home; people with little or no previous involvement in community or civic affairs; our neighbours who know the hardship of socio-economic disadvantages.

The heart of **Empowering U** rests in the development of participants' lasting and deep community (or civic) engagement. Heartland Democracy seeks to train the staff of our host organizations as well. In this way, we develop social (specifically civic) capital at both an individual and organizational level.

Through tailored coaching, **Empowering U** uses self-discovery to advance participants along a path toward active social, economic, and civic participation. Participants answer questions posed by their coach, moving through their own ranked values; their articulated issues of concern; the worlds of community, government, and politics; the roles of the media, businesses, houses of worship, community groups, and other institutions; the roles of culture and history; and the demonstrated power of active leadership at every level.

Depending upon the cohort, **Empowering U** can aid participants' preparation for community service, organizational leadership, community and civic leadership, networking for jobs, educational goal achievement, the building of socio-political networks, preparation for adulthood, social networking, and wealth creation, among other things. We take time to demonstrate to participants *the possibilities* above in order to make clear *the power* – for them – of social and civic capital. Coaches challenge and assist every participant to identify an issue of interest, connect with an individual working on that issue, sign up with one civic group, register to vote, and vote, and we track the results, along with other measures of civic involvement.

Using a nationally validated pre- and post-programmatic survey, our evaluator has found statistically significant increases in the desire of our participants to get involved in community issues, causes, efforts, and organizations.

In 2014, Empowering U is operating in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Menomonie, Wisconsin, with support from the F.R. Bigelow and St. Paul Foundations, The Minnesota Humanities Center, and the Otto Bremer Foundation. We work with college students at a multicultural student center, Somali-American teenagers, young people living in a group home, New Americans from Nepal, and students at an alternative high school. Our partners include Skyline Towers (a CommonBond community,) 180 Degrees, Twin Cities Rise!, Positive Alternatives Group Home, and the University of Wisconsin-Stout. To achieve a wider impact, we wish to "train the trainers" and provide the content and resources to as many host institutions as possible.

Empowering U helps participants learn how to network not only for community goals but also for their job searches, identification of resources, and financial security. We know that *cultivating the roots of democracy nurtures the roots of our economy.*

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Sample Comments

***Empowering U** opened my eyes.... I didn't know that the public was allowed to go to the Capitol, that you could go and talk about where the money is going. ...I didn't know it could come from my voice to make a change.*

--- Monica, Twin Cities Rise! participant

*We talked about some deep stuff. We learned **how to debate with people when you disagree**. ... I loved that class. **It did change me**. I had a **fear of things I didn't know about, but this class helped me** learn how to approach those things.*

--- Toby, high school participant

*Heartland Democracy was important to our students and, in my opinion, **important to other young people who feel excluded** from the political process. ... [it] helped our students walk away with a **better understanding of this process** and that it is important for them to be informed, aware, and a part of the process. ... **students were included in a critical dialogue... not just adults talking to them**. ...**for our students that level of engagement was powerful and, I hope, life changing**.*

--- Claude Maddox, then-Director, Skills for Tomorrow High School

It was a cool class. ... In this [program], you get to know more about government and things we don't really know about the world and things that you don't learn in other classes.

--- Delisa, high school participant

Communities with high levels of civic engagement [enjoy] ... lower poverty and unemployment rates, higher median incomes, and lower violent crime rates.

--- Professor Matthew Lee, Louisiana State University



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*Motivating the uninvolved
to participate in community and
providing the tools to do so.*



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Section 1: Framing

At a Glance	
Overview	Introduce Empowering U as a whole and then through guided conversation begin to establish trust among participants and with facilitator. When properly framed, administer the pre-programmatic survey. THEN go to the discussion.
Outline	Introduction Icebreaker Creating a Gracious Space Discussion Closing
Connections to Overall Program Goal	Begins to make it clear how Empowering U is relevant to their lives and sets stage for active engagement.
Desired Participant Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⑦ Break the ice and create trust ⑦ Create a safe, productive atmosphere or culture in group ⑦ They see what's in it for them ⑦ They hear what's in it for us, why it's important to us, what our goals are ⑦ They are introduced to the circle method ⑦ Together with the facilitator they set ground rules: Practice civil, respectful discussion and debate; one speaker at a time ⑦ They understand that part of the expectation of their involvement will be to choose an organization and issue with which to engage
Big Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the history of Empowering U? • What is community engagement and why is it important? • How is Empowering U relevant in participant's lives? • Why does Heartland Democracy care about engaging participants in community life? • What needs to happen or not happen in the group for them to be engaged? • Who are all of the people in the room? • What is a grassroots organization or effort?
Materials	⑦ Flip chart and markers or a Smartboard



Empowering U **Introduction**

Introduce yourself, including relevant information about your personal and professional life experience. The goal is to begin to establish trust, credibility, and an appropriate level of openness with participants

Then introduce the program.

Say something like: Empowering U is a program of an organization called Heartland Democracy. Heartland Democracy was started by a group of people who have worked in government, politics, and communities. They have seen the fruits of people coming together to solve problems. They now work to help individuals as well as community groups realize and solidify their own political values, and take action on specific issues.

[If speaking to youth:] They are particularly interested in working with young people since you all are emerging leaders, decision makers, workers, parents, and community members. The founders of the organization care about this work because when more people are engaged in a democracy, it is stronger. When a democracy is stronger so is the economy, the living conditions, the quality of life for its people, including you and me.

We don't always realize that all of us can make change in our communities if we know how to do it. There's a lot of power in numbers, for example, and we will help you



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organize to make the biggest impact possible. Along the way we'll also explore not just what you want to achieve, but why. You'll think about your own values and convictions, and learn about all of the factors that affect politics in our communities. In the end, knowing all of this will help you understand how to most effectively organize and use your own power to make the changes you think your community needs. Heartland Democracy will be a facilitator and helper; you will be the ones who choose what topics to work on, what change you'd like to see, and what you will do to make that change happen.

Finally, there is this benefit: social scientists have shown that when people work together to achieve something for their community, they respect each other. That respect from others brings rising feelings of dignity. With respect and dignity comes a deeper happiness. Happiness, in turn, yields all kinds of good things: more dignity, higher goals, self-improvement, a better work ethic: we could go on and on. So this work helps individuals improve their community – and improved communities help their residents person by person. It is what we call a "virtuous cycle upward."

Icebreaker

Use one of your choice or this suggestion: Start off with asking who has a good memory. A couple of people might raise their hands or you might not even get anyone. If you do then you ask for their name and invite

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them to sit next to you to help introduce the first activity.

Say something like: *Think about an adjective that describes you and starts with the same letter as with your name. For example, I am going to introduce myself. My name is Jill Jones and I am joyful.*

Then point to the person next to you and example:

He or she will say their name and their adjective but also say my name and my adjective. And that will continue with the person next to this person. He/she will say their name and their adjective and as well as repeat my name and my adjective and the person next to me. The challenge for you is to know everyone's name and their adjectives, but we can help you as we go along.

Ask everyone if they understand the activity and answer any questions. Give about two minutes for participants to think about their adjectives and then begin. Encourage participants to help each other if needed. And try to pay attention to the names, because it's an important practice for a facilitator to learn participants' names.

When you are done with the game, thank everyone for participating. You can also end the activity by saying how differently and colorfully we have described ourselves and likening this activity to the kinds of

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positive and diverse conversation you hope to have throughout the sessions.

Creating a Gracious Space

The goal of this activity is to establish a set of expectations about how the group will interact so that participants feel safe and comfortable sharing their ideas, opinions, thoughts, and feelings. Use a process of your choosing or the one that follows.

Step 1: Setting the Context (5 minutes)—Explain, *Our task today is to create a culture that will support our gathering.*

Right now, on your own, think of a time when you've experienced Gracious Space, whatever this means to you. What was the setting? What did you experience?

Step 2: Pairing Up (5-10 minutes)—Ask that group members pair up with someone they don't yet know well. Instruct the pairs to share their stories of Gracious Space with each other for the next five minutes.

Step 3: Discussing as a group (10 minutes)—Ask the pairs to come together again as a large group. Ask the group, *Without retelling your stories, who would like to share some of the characteristics of the Gracious Space you and your partner discussed?*



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As participants share their characteristics, record them on the flip chart. When they have finished read back the words and ask if there is anything anyone would like to add. Keep this list posted throughout your sessions and refer back to it if necessary.

Discussion

- 1. What is a grassroots organization? Can you think of any examples?*
- 2. What is community? Politics? Government? civic? Civics?*
- 3. What is civic engagement?*
- 4. Why is civic engagement important?*

Closing

Ask participants to reflect on the following questions:

- 1. What do you really care about in your own life?*
- 2. What public situation or problem do you think is of most concern?*

Then ask them to pay attention between now and the next section to where other people seem to care about different things than they do.